

DRAFT
Recycling Advisory Committee (RAC) Meeting Minutes
November 13, 2019 8 am - 9:30 am
City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Council Chambers

Minutes taken by Debby Knight

Members Present: Ilana Bebachick, Debby Galef, Martha Henry, Debby Knight, Janet Mosley, Laura Nichols, Michael Papas, Quinten Steenhuis, Matthew St Onge, Kristen Watkins

Members Absent: Rob Gogan, Susy Jones, Meera Singh, Mary Verhage

Staff Present: Camilla Elvis, Mike Orr

Members of the Public Present: Helen Snively, Sakiko Somichi, Scott MacGrath.

Housekeeping:

Minutes of the October meeting were approved with no changes.

Final discussion of the single-use plastics letter to Commissioner O’Riordan:

The bulk of the meeting time was spent reviewing the draft of the letter. There was a robust discussion of both the content and some of the specific wording.

Major discussion points:

The importance of creating an ordinance that can allow for flexibility as things change over time came up frequently. There was discussion of the issue of “compostable” products the RAC doesn’t recommend switching to since they won’t be accommodated in the current organics system. If the compost options change, it might affect what we recommend in the future – perhaps even by the time the ordinance is in place. The type of single-use serviceware products available to businesses are also likely to change. Who will identify accessible alternatives and ensure they have an environmental advantage and are functionally equivalent?

Mike pointed out that the RAC support for any food serviceware containing PFAS may come as a surprise to the City Council. Avoiding PFAS would require restaurants to use recyclable plastic or certified compostable containers.

There was a brief discussion of the idea of a single-use cup charge and whether a charge (perhaps \$.25) or a cup discount provides a greater incentive, as well as how each might affect businesses. A discount could likely not be mandated.

Several people mentioned the importance of a timeline with a phased-in approach. Since other groups will be weighing on the single-use plastics ban, Mike suggested the RAC not offer a more specific timeline at this point. The letter advocates for a phased-in approach with ideas for beginning as well as for the future.

Once edited, the letter was unanimously approved. The letter is at the end of these Minutes.

City Updates

- Compost expansion continues to be successful. Twelve thousand households have been added to the organics collection program since September.
- Cambridge's recycling contamination rate continues to be excellent.

Public comment:

- There was a question about compostable bags and paper bags in the compost stream. Mike mentioned that a little paper is OK, but the system can't handle a lot. Paper towels go through easily, but are a small percentage of the total volume.

Announcements:

- Those interested should reapply for the RAC by November 15th.
- The DPW will be conducting waste audits on December 9 and 12, from 8am – noon. Volunteers are needed, so let Mike know if you can join one of the audit sessions.
- Mike suggests that the topic of the December meeting be a recap of the year and a look at 2020 and beyond.

Letter from RAC to DPW Commissioner Owen O'Riordan. November 13, 2019

Dear Commissioner O'Riordan:

In May 2019, the City Council voted to draft a ban on single-use plastic items, with input from the Recycling Advisory Committee and other stakeholders. Taking up the charge, the RAC conducted research, collected data, and facilitated conversations in order to develop guidance around the specific challenge of regulating single-use food serviceware in the city. This letter summarizes our key findings and recommendations for Cambridge to consider as it moves forward on this important topic.

We commend the City of Cambridge's commitment to broad sustainability action through its progressive net zero planning, Bring Your Own Bag Ordinance, Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and more -- all of which deeply consider both the environmental and human complexities of these issues. Although the City Council requested that the RAC explore a ban on single-use plastics, we recommend that the Council consider developing a broader ordinance regulating all single-use food serviceware that is shaped around a wide range of environmental and social factors that are important to Cambridge, in line with the Zero Waste Master Plan. We recommend that an ordinance aim to do the following:

- Prevent and reduce the impact of certain single-use food serviceware items on the environment, particularly the marine environment, and on human health;
- Help the City meet its goal to reduce trash by 80 percent by 2050;
- Promote a strong culture of reuse amongst City of Cambridge residents and visitors;
- Recognize economic impacts of changes to local businesses and provide support to small business owners in order to preserve Cambridge's thriving retail environment.

Below, we have outlined our specific recommendations for the City to consider when drafting an ordinance:

1. Reduce the availability of single-use food serviceware items using a phased approach

We recommend reducing the availability of single-use food serviceware items in the City of Cambridge through a combination of banning particularly problematic items and making others less easy to obtain.

We recommend implementing these changes using a phased approach that prioritizes items based on how environmentally problematic they are (i.e. impact on marine life, recyclability, etc.), their level of necessity, and how readily accessible alternatives are. Specifically, we believe the following approaches from other cities could benefit the City of Cambridge:

- Begin with a ban on plastic accessories not essential for food service, such as: plastic beverage plugs, cocktail stirrers and sticks, plastic toothpicks, and straws. Acceptable single-use alternatives to these materials might include natural fiber (e.g., paper, wood), but we recommend that they only be made available upon request. The RAC recommends considerations for individuals with disabilities who may require straws or other items.
- Make other accessory disposable foodware items available upon request, rather than as a default for both dine-in and take-out options. Examples of items in this category include: napkins, utensils, condiment cups and packets, cup sleeves, etc.
- Require that produce bags in grocery stores be compostable or recyclable in the City of Cambridge's curbside programs.

Overall, the RAC recommends that if the City opts to ban a specific material or product, an accessible alternative must be identified, and the alternative must also have a clear environmental advantage and be functionally equivalent. The current limitations of the region's waste management systems should also be a consideration when making decisions about materials.

- The RAC does not recommend substituting single use items with compostable plastics that are not currently accepted in the City of Cambridge composting program. Currently, the City of Cambridge composting program cannot accept compostable paper or plastics (except for compostable plastic bags).
- We recommend that the City be aware that switching from one single-use item to another may not reduce the overall volume of trash in our system or necessarily reduce the environmental impact of our consumption.
- The RAC does not recommend replacing single use plastic items with fiber-based alternatives containing toxic perfluorinated chemicals (PFAS) due to human health concerns.

2. Plan for a Future of Reusables

The RAC envisions a transformation in Cambridge from a culture of single-use food serviceware to one of reusable food serviceware, in order for the City to reach its environmental goals and minimize the impact of its material consumption. We recognize this is a significant challenge. Consideration should be given to the economic impacts of these changes on businesses. We have identified and listed four actions below based on policies in our peer cities that could assist residents and visitors in making this transformation possible.

- Explore the implementation of a single-use cup charge (e.g. \$.25) that could be modelled after the "Bring Your Own Bag" initiative.
- Explore the possibility of requiring dine-in food vendors to use reusable serviceware. Make considerations for small establishments that do not currently have the infrastructure to accommodate cleaning reusable food serviceware.
- Provide technical assistance and mini-grants to assist food vendors with the transition prior to enforcement of any requirements.
- Consider requiring the installation of dishwashing/sanitizing equipment at the time of any new construction or tenant improvements to a food service establishment.

3. Provide businesses with clear communications materials and outreach around any new policies

As with any policy change, the RAC believes it will be critical to invest in a robust informational campaign to help businesses transition. Information should be made available in a timely, accessible fashion and include:

- The timeline of when the phases of the ordinance would take effect.
- A list of acceptable single-use alternatives and information about where they can be purchased for any products that are banned.
- Clear language and data around the intent and benefits of the ordinance.
- Downloadable signage available to all businesses to communicate changes such as items now behind counters, items no longer allowable in the City of Cambridge, etc.

We recommend that over time the City continue to revisit banning or requiring alternatives to single-use serviceware if environmentally advantageous (e.g. for marine life, greenhouse gas emissions) given the City of Cambridge's waste management system.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations and your continued commitment to the City of Cambridge's progressive sustainability efforts. We expect significant further research and community discussion will be needed to successfully implement these recommendations. The RAC is available to discuss any of the points made in this letter and looks forward to further collaboration on promoting a culture of reuse and reducing the consumption of single-use items in the City.

Sincerely,

The Cambridge Recycling Advisory Committee